



October 9, 2019

Response to October 7, 2019 Letter from Firefighters

Open letter to the Bowen Island Fire Department Volunteer Firefighters

Dear Member:

We write in response to the letter as attached (names redacted for privacy) dated October 7, 2019 and sent on behalf of volunteer firefighters.

We are deeply grateful for the commitment and services that have been provided to the residents and visitors of our community by our past and present volunteer firefighters. As a result, we are very concerned and disheartened by the notice provided on behalf of 26 volunteer firefighters in your October 7 letter about your intended resignation from Bowen's Fire Department. This is particularly so in the context of an ultimatum issued by the volunteer firefighters, on such a short timeframe, in the absence of a fair and due process related to the concerns you have raised, and in the context of emergency services that are vital in our community. This ultimatum compromises our ability to meet our obligations related to the safety of the community and our obligations to our staff and volunteers.

As you know, our Fire Chief, Derek Dickson, was hired and began work on July 15, 2019 to ensure that BIM is able to uphold its responsibility to our community. We strongly support our Fire Chief in his mandate.

We are undoubtedly in a time of transition as our community invests further in our fire services and our Fire Chief was chosen carefully, in an inclusive process that involved our former Fire Chief and members of our community. He is exceptionally experienced and skilled and we are grateful to have him in this position and as a new member of our community. While you have acknowledged in your letter that there can be challenges with any transition, you have indicated that as a group you have made every effort to address those challenges. Respectfully, in the short time frames involved, it cannot be the case that we have exhausted reasonable efforts to move forward constructively.

By way of review, as you are aware, when issues were first raised with BIM formally by the firefighters on September 10, 2019, BIM acted quickly to arrange for a meeting for your representatives with BIM. Flowing from that, Council resolved on September 30, 2019 that an independent Core Service Review of the Fire Department would be undertaken that includes but is not limited to:

1. Assessing the capabilities of the department;
2. Confirming the level of service circumstances (currently exterior);
3. Determining the apparatus and equipment requirements;
4. Determining training requirements, cost and duration of training;

5. Evaluating fulfilment of Provincial training regulations;
6. Assessing compliance with the Occupational Health and Safety Act of BC and its accompanying regulations;
7. Reviewing current compensation methods
8. Reviewing the BC Fire Commissioner's Inspection and Audit Checklists;
9. Review of the recommendations provided by the Fire Underwriter Survey (FUS).

Our intention with the review is to hire professional independent consultants specializing in fire department service reviews and to have the review completed in phases. The first phase will focus on training level requirements for volunteers as mandated by the Province. Although we do not doubt that our firefighters are committed to providing professional and effective services and collectively have significant experience, we need to be able to establish objectively that we are meeting the provincially mandated standards. We are not currently able to do so. This requires for example, that we maintain a training plan and actively identify and centrally track the training of each of our members. A failure to do so could result in safety issues for our firefighters and community members and have serious implications for BIM's liability and some homeowner's insurance. It is simply not tenable for training to be conducted in any other manner. As you are aware, our Fire Chief has implemented a schedule and has arranged for external assistance to provide training.

Although you have indicated that the firefighters met with the Fire Chief twice in August about your concerns, many of the firefighters ceased attending further practice and training sessions with the Fire Chief and refused our reasonable request that membership resume attendance at the training practices as set out by the Fire Chief pending the outcome of the Core Service Review.

To the extent that your concerns relate to operational issues we are confident that the information we receive from the Core Service Review will provide meaningful input into such matters and that it will assist in resolving any differences.

For any other concerns, we wish to support the membership and our Fire Chief in reaching a constructive resolution. Although some discussion has taken place to date, there has not been an opportunity to fully understand these matters. To that end, we will engage a third party neutral facilitator who can assist in building a more constructive working relationship within the Fire Department. This will take some time but we will commence this process immediately and communicate with you about the status of this process as it unfolds. We will also communicate directly with you regarding any interim measures that are put in place to support our staff and volunteers of the Fire Department.

In your letter of October 7 you have said that your concerns are fundamental to the operation of the Fire Department, that they are not reconcilable, and that the only remaining solution is to terminate the employment of the Fire Chief. We hope that this is a position you will reconsider as a group and as individuals who are committed to our community. Accordingly, we request that you each reconsider your decision to tender your resignation with trust that we will take further concrete steps going forward and so that we have time to meaningfully address these matters without resorting to a polar position that is fundamentally lacking in due or fair process.

As you are aware, part of the Core Services Review will include a review of current compensation methods. Currently, our Volunteer Firefighters receive payment of premiums for various benefits plans for themselves and their families. We understand that there have been rumours circulating that there were threats to end your access to benefits. We assure you this is not the case but of course, benefits flow with continuing service in the Department. As a gesture of goodwill, BIM will extend coverage for all of the Volunteer Firefighters for a three month period to the end of January 2019. For those who remain active with the Fire Department, your benefits will continue. For those of you who do not communicate your intention to continue in your role, this will afford you an opportunity to secure alternate coverage. For those of you who are undecided, it will give you some time to consider your options while we make further inroads to resolving differences and for the work of the Core Services Review and the facilitator to proceed.

We do note that some of our firefighters have already communicated their intention not to resign. Any of you who wish to continue in your role are requested to advise us as soon as possible and to resume your participation in further practice and training sessions in keeping with the schedule prepared by the Fire Chief. As we are committed to ongoing efforts to work constructively to resolve any issues of concern, those of you continuing with the Fire Department who wish to participate will each have an opportunity to meet with the facilitator at your option. We are in the process of engaging a facilitator and intend for meetings to commence next week.

As a priority, in the circumstances we have developed contingency plans in order to address our immediate needs and it would assist us for planning purposes to know as soon as possible from each of you as to whether or not you will continue in service of the community. We will need to hear from those of you who intend to continue by no later than 60 days. Please email mayorandcouncil@bimbc.ca directly regarding your intentions.

On behalf of our community we are extraordinarily grateful to each of you for your past service and we hope that we can move forward with continued good will for the benefit of our community.

Your sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gary Ander', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mayor Gary Ander

Enclosure